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ABSTRACT

This study compares explanatory factors related to the educational expectations of Japanese American and White college students. The research was conducted at a major West Coast state university located in an urban metropolitan area. Data were gathered through a questionnaire mailed to a sample of 200 Japanese Americans and 200 White full-time undergraduates randomly selected from institutional records. Eighty percent of the Japanese American and 84% of the Whites returned questionnaires. Results indicated that the processes related to educational ambition and, therefore, eventual status attainment are different for Japanese Americans than for Whites. Forty one percent of the Japanese American respondents expected to obtain up to four years of college education, 33% expected to work toward a master's degree, and 26% expected to do work toward a doctorate or professional degree. The comparable percentages for Whites were 50, 31, and 19. Level of academic performance along with the related variables of academic self-confidence and concern over the negative effects of inadequate grades have the highest coefficients for both Japanese Americans and Whites. However, the most important variable for the former is concern over inadequate grades while the most important for the latter is academic self-confidence. Parents' expectations, concern over the negative effects of insufficient motivation, and the importance of "connections" in determining educational achievement assumed an intermediate position of importance for Japanese Americans. None of these variables have the same relative degree of importance for Whites. (Author/RM)

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Race and Educational Ambitions: The Case of Japanese Americans*

by

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Abstract

Despite previous research on the educational ambitions of racial minorities, little work has been done with Asian American groups. This study compares explanatory factors related to the educational expectations of Japanese American and white college students. Three academic variables are most important for distinguishing between levels of ambition for Japanese Americans. Three others are moderately important including one variable which gives an indication of how the opportunity structure is perceived. Background socio-economic status has some effect but sex has relatively little. The results support earlier investigations which have shown differences in the processes related to ambition and status attainment for whites and nonwhites.

Race and Educational Ambitions:
The Case of Japanese Americans

The process of education for racial minorities has been a major area of social science inquiry, and a significant amount of attention has been given to educational ambitions. Early work on this topic was primarily concerned with determining the extent of racial differences, often with conflicting results (cf. reviews by Dreger & Miller, 1968; Klingelhofer & Reynolds, 1970). This research was related to a much larger body of investigation of youth aspirations and success values principally conducted by rural sociologists, social and vocational psychologists, and educators (Kuvlesky & Reynolds, 1970). While some recent studies are extensions of these earlier efforts (e.g. Gordon, 1972; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972; Gurin & Epps, 1975), emphasis is also being placed on examining ambition within explanatory causal models. Much of the latter reflects the influence of sociological work on status attainment, especially the development of models by Sewall and his colleagues (Sewall & Hauser, 1972, 1975) in which educational and occupational ambitions are critical mediators between background variables such as family socioeconomic status and educational and occupational attainment. Generally, status attainment models better explain the ambitions and attainments of whites than nonwhites, and various refinements have been suggested (Porter, 1974; Hout & Morgan, 1975; Portes & Wilson, 1976; Kerckhoff & Campbell, 1977a, b; DeBord et al., 1977; Howell & Frese, 1979; Allen, 1980).

Despite the attention given to the educational ambitions of racial minorities, little empirical research has been done with Asian Americans. This is noteworthy as some Asian American groups, for instance Japanese

Americans, have relatively high aggregate levels of educational attainment, and since this, in turn, has been linked to their socioeconomic mobility (Petersen, 1971; Levine & Montero, 1973; Kitano, 1976). Though there are problems associated with overstating the educational and occupational accomplishments of such groups (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1980; Endo, 1980), an investigation of their ambitions can contribute to an overall understanding of minority group status attainment processes.

Only a small amount of descriptive data exists on Asian American educational ambitions, and these are byproducts of studies with more general objectives. In the well-known Equality of Educational Opportunity survey, Coleman et al. (1966, p. 283) reported that 73 percent of the Asian American twelfth graders wanted at least some college training (compared to 58 percent of the total sample), and 31 percent wanted to do graduate or professional work. While examining Japanese American educational achievement, Schwartz (1971) found that 85 percent of her secondary school subsample aspired to an education beyond high school. In a fall 1973 followup in the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972, 77 percent of the Asian Americans said they would like to get some college education (compared to 58 percent of the total sample) and 34 percent wanted to do postgraduate work. In addition, 73 percent said they actually <u>expected</u> to get some college education (compared to 52 percent of the total sample) and 22 percent expected to do postgraduate work (Tabler, 1976, pp. 72, 82). Similar data are available from fall 1974 and fall 1976 followup surveys (Peng & Holt, 1979; Peng et al., 1979); unfortunately published reports on the initial spring 1972 study do not contain separate information

for Asian Americans (Fetters, 1975). Finally, on the basis of a 1971 national study of college seniors, Baird (1973, 1974) reported that 58 percent of the Asian Americans planned to do graduate or professional work the following fall (compared to 38 percent of the whites) and of these, 78 percent actually enrolled.

Two studies go beyond description and begin to look at relationships between Asian American educational ambition and other variables. Using Coleman's data on Asian American twelfth graders to develop a multivariate causal model, Boardman et al. (1978) found that a composite measure of educational and occupational expectation was affected by other endogenous variables like motivation, parents' expectations, and self-esteem and by a few exogenous school, teacher, and student characteristics but not by sex or socioeconomic status. In a multiethnic investigation of student plans to obtain a master's degree or doctorate, Centra (1980) reported that grade point average, Graduate Record Examination verbal scores, and sex affected Asian American graduate degree objectives but that institutional characteristics such as affluence, selectivity, and predominant racial make-up did not. Within his sample, a smaller overall proportion of Asian Americans planned to obtain the doctorate than blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, or Native Americans.

The findings presented above suggest two priority focuses for additional research. First, the antecedants of Asian American educational ambitions need to be further examined. Boardman et al. used old (1965) data that make their results most useful for subsequent longitudinal comparisons. Also, they used a composite educational/occupational expecta-

tion measure; while these two variables are correlated, the processes related to each are somewhat different (Sewall & Hauser, 1975). Centra's work was limited to students already planning postgraduate study and only included student ability and institutional characteristics as explanatory variables.

A second priority focus for additional research has to do with the population to be investigated. Given the very high percentages of Asian American high school students who are apt to express a desire to continue on to college, the antecedants of the ambitions of those already enrolled in college need to be studied. This contention is supported by data which show that high proportions of Asian Americans actually do go on to attend college. For instance, in a major three generation investigation of the Japanese American community, Levine & Rhodes (1981) found that 88 percent of their third generation subsample (all were over age 17) had some college education. And, in the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972, 74 and 64 percent of the Asian Americans respectively reported they were taking academic college courses in the fall of 1973 and fall of 1974 (Tabler, 1976, p. 18; Peng & Holt, 1979, p. 46).

In line with the two priority focuses identified above, this study examines explanatory factors related to the educational ambitions of college students from one large Asian American group, the Japanese Americans.

Study Design

This research was conducted at a major West Coast state university located in an urban metropolitan area. Data were gathered through a questionnaire mailed to a sample of 200 Japanese American and 200 white

full-time undergraduates randomly selected from institutional records. Eighty percent (160) of the Japanese Americans and 84 percent (168) of the whites returned questionnaires. The respondents were roughly representative of their counterparts in the university except that they slightly underrepresented the numbers of Japanese American sophomores and juniors and slightly overrepresented the number of white females.

In this study, educational ambition, the dependent variable, was conceptualized as educational expectation rather than aspiration and was measured by responses to the question: "As things stand now, how much education do you think you will actually get?" Thirteen explanatory variables were also included. Background family socioeconomic status, academic performance, and parents' expectations were major variables in previous work on status attainment and were measured here respectively by a two-item family income/father's occupation index, college grade point average, and a two-item index encompassing questions on the level and influence of parental expectations. Some status attainment research on the effects of racial differences also examined the importance of sex (e.g. Hout & Morgan, 1975; Howell & Frese, 1979) and that variable was incorporated into this study. Class standing was added as a control variable; it is possible, for example, that larger proportions of the upper classes consist of those with high ambitions because of the selective attrition over time of students with lower ability or motivational levels. Field of study was likewise included as a control variable; a sizeable percentage of Japanese Americans major in the physical, natural, or health sciences (Endo, 1980) and their ambitions could be higher than those majoring in

other areas.

Many investigators have noted the importance of academic self-confidence. In particular, Baird (1973) has shown its relationship to college student postgraduate plans, and Onoda (1976) found that Japanese American high achievers had more confidence in their abilities than underachievers. Academic self-confidence was measured here with a two-item index that included questions on the level of confidence in one's academic abilities and the chances of reaching one's educational goals. Educational ambitions can be forestalled by a number of circumstances. In this study, concerns over the possible negative effects on reaching one's educational objectives of inadequate grades, insufficient motivation, lack of intelligence or talent, and lack of money were measured by individual question items. Finally, educational ambitions have been shown to be influenced by views of the opportunity structure in the wider society (Rosen, 1959; Kahl, 1965; Kerckhoff & Campbell, 1977a). Two variables were incorporated here that were related to perceptions of the opportunity structure: the importance of racial discrimination and the importance of "connections" (i.e. who you know) in determining educational acheivement; both were measured by individual questions. The addition of these last variables was especially important in view of earlier criticisms that status attainment research has tended to overemphasize personal and family factors to the exclusion of structural ones (Kerckhoff, 1976; Horan, 1978).

(Table 1 about here)

Results and Discussion

Forty-one percent of the Japanese American respondents expected to

obtain up to four years of college education, 33 percent expected to work toward a master's degree, and 26 percent expected to do work toward a doctorate or professional degree; the comparable percentages for whites were 50, 31, and 19. Several types of multivariate analyses were performed on the data, but the effects of the explanatory variables could best be summarized through discriminant analyses after dichotomizing educational ambition into expectation of getting up to four years of college education and expectation of doing postgraduate work. The alternative use of least squares multiple regression techniques was considered less appropriate since ambition was not measured on anything approaching an interval level basis. Discriminant analyses of the explanatory variables for Japanese Americans and whites produced discriminant functions with canonical correlations of .71 and .50 respectively and Wilks' lambdas of .50 ($p<.001$) and .74 ($p<.001$); these analyses also produced classification functions which were able to correctly reclassify 91 and 73 percent respectively of the original cases. Clearly the explanatory variables better distinguished the two levels of ambition for Japanese Americans than for whites. Table 1 contains the two sets of standardized canonical discriminant function coefficients. Comparisons between the two in the following discussion will be made only in regard to the relative magnitudes of the coefficients within each function. It should be remembered that each coefficient represents the relative importance of a particular variable in distinguishing between lower and higher levels of ambition among Japanese Americans or whites controlling for the effects of all other variables.

Not unexpectedly, level of academic performance along with the

related variables of academic self-confidence and concern over the negative effects of inadequate grades have the highest coefficients for both Japanese Americans and whites. However the most important variable for the former is concern over inadequate grades while the most important for the latter is academic self-confidence. Although the implications of this difference should not be overdrawn, the high importance of concern over the negative effects of inadequate grades in distinguishing levels of ambition among Japanese Americans might reflect a heightened awareness of the conditions that must be met and/or the problems and barriers that must be overcome in reaching educational goals. If it exists, such a heightened awareness could plausibly be accounted for by a number of circumstances ranging from specific patterns of peer group interaction or academic socialization to the broader effects of cultural values or the historical status of Japanese Americans as a minority group. Additional data must be collected to support any particular explanation.

After the top three variables, three others assume a more intermediate position of importance for Japanese Americans: parents' expectations, concern over the negative effects of insufficient motivation, and the importance of "connections" in determining educational achievement. None of these variables has the same relative degree of importance for whites, and each therefore deserves further discussion.

Parents' expectations were found to affect the ambitions of high school students in previous work (Sewall & Hauser, 1975; Boardman et al., 1978), but its lesser effect here in comparison with other variables on the ambitions of older and perhaps more independent college students, at least white students, is not surprising. However, the continuing importance

of parents' expectations for Japanese Americans points to the existence of strong family ties and to cultural and/or institutional and structural factors which make young Japanese Americans more responsive to parental influences including those related to education. Some research shows the contribution of cultural factors such as the retention of traditional Japanese values (Schwartz, 1971; Conner, 1977) but further investigation is needed on the relevance of other factors. In addition, the contribution of cultural factors could instead involve American values which Japanese Americans have adopted (cf. Kitano, 1976; Montero & Tsukashima, 1977) or even distinct but nontraditional cultural components derived from group experiences in America.

The importance for Japanese Americans of concern over the negative effects of insufficient motivation may be linked to a more general emphasis on the efficacy of hard work and determination. This emphasis has been seen as characterizing many Japanese Americans (Kitano, 1976; Conner, 1977) though again, as in the case of parents' expectations, its antecedants probably involve more than the retention of traditional Japanese values or acculturation to American values. In this study it is interesting that the Japanese Americans with lower levels of ambition have higher concerns over insufficient motivation as forestalling even their more modest educational plans.

The variables dealing with "connections" and racial discrimination as determinants of educational achievement give indications of how the opportunity structure is viewed. While racial discrimination is not an important variable for Japanese Americans (nor understandably for whites), "connections" is moderately important. This finding does not mean that

the opportunity structure is seen by some as being closed, but it does indicate a view that more than individual merit is required for educational achievement. Further work is needed on the nature of Japanese American perceptions, particularly in light of recent increases in Japanese American and Asian American activism which have enchanced the awareness of institutional inequities (Endo, 1974).

Of the remaining variables in Table 1, sex is moderately important for whites which corroborates prior status attainment research, and men have higher ambitions overall than women. On the other hand, sex is not an important variable for Japanese Americans which contrasts with Centra's (1980) results but supports those of Boardman et al. (1978) as described earlier. Field of study is slightly important for Japanese Americans; also, those in scientific/technical majors generally have higher ambitions. Concern over the negative effects of lack of intelligence or talent is not important for either Japanese Americans or whites.

Finally, three other variables have some degree of importance for both Japanese Americans and whites: concern over the negative effects of lack of money, class standing, and background socioeconomic status. Concern over lack of money is reasonable given the financial costs of continuing on to postgraduate education. Class standing was included in this study as a control variable but its importance may have to do with selective attrition which results in larger proportions of the upper classes consisting of those with high ambitions. The degree of importance of socioeconomic status, when controlling for other explanatory variables, is consistent with previous status attainment research. Much of the effect of socioeconomic

status on ambition is indirect and would be seen more clearly if the causal ordering of the explanatory variables was differentiated. The specific result for Japanese Americans, however, contrasts with the finding of Boardman et al. (1978) that socioeconomic status has no effect on the ambitions of Asian American high school students.

Conclusion

This study shows that three academic variables are very important in distinguishing levels of educational ambition for Japanese Americans and that the most important is concern over the negative effects of inadequate grades. Three other variables have a moderate degree of importance including one which gives some idea of how the opportunity structure is viewed. Among the remaining variables, sex has no importance but socioeconomic status is slightly important as is field of study. While a few of these results differ with those of Centra (1980) and Boardman et al. (1978), most are compatible with the findings from these two prior investigations involving Asian American students. However, as noted before, the present research expands on their examination of explanatory factors, focuses on a more appropriate student population, and adds to the limited amount of empirical work in this area on Asian American groups.

More significantly, this study provides evidence that the processes related to educational ambition and therefore eventual status attainment are different for Japanese Americans than for whites. For instance, the explanatory variables distinguish levels of ambition better for Japanese Americans than whites, suggesting that another set of variables would be more relevant for the latter, and there are dissimilarities in the relative

importance of specific variables. This study therefore adds support to previous investigations which pointed out differences in the precursors of the ambitions and attainments of whites and nonwhites.

Since the present research was conducted on Japanese Americans at one university, care should be exercised in generalizing the results. More work is needed, particularly in regard to other Asian American groups such as the Chinese, Pilipinos, Koreans or Indochinese. Future studies could profitably look at the effects of other factors like patterns of academic socialization or community and cultural norms. Further efforts might also disentangle the causal ordering among explanatory variables and develop additional measures of the structural influences on both educational ambitions and achievements.

Table 1. Standardized Canonical Discriminant Function Coefficients for Japanese Americans and Whites

Variables	Japanese Americans	Whites
Socioeconomic Status	.30	.26
Sex*	.08	.36
Parents' Expectations	.41	.19
Class Standing	.23	.26
Field of Study**	-.20	-.04
Academic Performance	.65	.52
Academic Self-Confidence	.56	.63
Concern Over Inadequate Grades	.70	.48
Concern Over Insufficient Motivation	-.45	-.16
Concern Over Lack of Money	.29	.24
Concern Over Lack of Intelligence/Talent	-.02	.12
Importance of Racial Discrimination in Determining Educ. Achievement	-.04	.01
Importance of "Connections" in Determining Educ. Achievement	.46	.11

* 1=female; 2=male

** 1=physical, natural, health science majors; 2=other majors

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